

MY JESUS

FROM HEARTACHE
TO HOPE

ANNE WILSON

With Marcie Maggart



NELSON
BOOKS

An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

My Jesus

© 2022 by Anne Wilson

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Nelson Books, an imprint of Thomas Nelson. Nelson Books and Thomas Nelson are registered trademarks of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Published in association with the literary agency of WTA Media, LLC., Franklin, Tennessee.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Scripture quotations marked MEV are taken from the Modern English Version. Copyright © 2014 by Military Bible Association. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible © (NASB). Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.lockman.org

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version ©, NIV ©. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. © Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.Zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc. ©

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version ©. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation. © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Ministries, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wilson, Anne, 2002- author.

Title: *My Jesus* : from heartache to hope / Anne Wilson with Marcie Maggart.

Description: Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 2022. | Summary: "In *My Jesus*, Anne Wilson shares her remarkable journey through the loss of her brother and the surprising moment she heard God's voice calling her to do the unexpected--sing and create music that would draw people to Him, which then birthed her #1 hit song, "My Jesus."-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022019449 (print) | LCCN 2022019450 (ebook) | ISBN 9781400238224 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781400238231 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Consolation. | Bereavement—Religious aspects--Christianity. | Grief--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Contemporary Christian music--History and criticism.

Classification: LCC BV4909 .W56 2022 (print) | LCC BV4909 (ebook) | DDC 248.8/6--dc23/eng/20220720

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022019449>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022019450>

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my precious brother in heaven, Jacob



Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>Foreword by Matthew West</i> | ix |
| Chapter 1: Faith Like a Child | 1 |
| Chapter 2: Jacob Kent Wilson | 21 |
| Chapter 3: June 7, 2017 | 37 |
| Chapter 4: Choosing to Trust | 53 |
| Chapter 5: Offering My Song | 69 |
| Chapter 6: Through the Valley | 87 |
| Chapter 7: What a Beautiful Name | 103 |
| Chapter 8: A God-Sized Dream | 123 |
| Chapter 9: Turning Points | 143 |
| Chapter 10: The Release | 159 |
| Chapter 11: Seasons of Hope | 177 |
| <i>Epilogue: A Final Note from Anne</i> | 193 |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | 195 |
| <i>About the Author</i> | 196 |



Foreword

I REMEMBER RECEIVING THE PHONE CALL. IT WAS A familiar request for my line of work as a songwriter in Nashville. “There’s a new artist and she’s really talented,” the record label said. “Would you be willing to write a song with her?”

Although most people might know me as a recording artist, my earliest days in Nashville were mostly spent behind the scenes as a writer. And while these days I get to make records and tour around the world singing my own songs, I’ve always felt called to champion other young artists as they share their story with the world—one three-minute song at a time. So I accepted the invitation to write with a new artist named Anne Wilson.

Our appointment began the way most do, with coffee and conversation. I learned about Anne’s love of Jesus, Dunkin’ Donuts iced coffee, country music, and the great state of Kentucky. Now, at its worst, a songwriting session can feel like a stress-filled, pressure-packed environment that leaves you insecure and convinced you’ve chosen the wrong profession. It’s difficult to be vulnerable and honest in front of people you’re close to, let alone a stranger you met only an hour ago! But that’s what

FOREWORD

songwriting takes: vulnerability and honesty. And those things are only accessible to us in safe places. At its best, the songwriting room can transform into that safe place where you're free to wear your heart on your sleeve. On this day a safe place was found.

I was deeply moved as eighteen-year-old Anne shared the same powerful story you are about to read in this book. A story of faith, family, tragedy, and redemption. The next thing I knew, we were singing, crying, and writing a song called "My Jesus." I smile as I think about how that song has gone on to move the hearts of so many people around the world. Like the song, this book is a word-by-word reminder that there is one who can change your life. One name above all names. And in that one name we find the answer to all of life's most difficult questions:

Where can I find a firm foundation when the world around me is crumbling? *Jesus.*

Where can I find comfort in the middle of my mourning?
Jesus.

Who offers me rest when I'm past the point of weary? *Jesus.*

Who can make a broken heart beat again? *Jesus.*

Who loves me unconditionally? *Jesus*

Who can work all things for my good? *Jesus.*

Just as Anne invited me into her story that day in the songwriting room, she is now inviting *you* into her story with this powerful book. And like any great story, this is one we can all see ourselves in. Every life will be touched by trials, pain, loss,

FOREWORD

even grief. I am praying this book provides the same safe place for you that we discovered that day in the studio. Invite Jesus to meet you in that safe place and rest assured, He will. He stands at the door of your heart and knocks. Let Him in and let my Jesus change your life.

—MATTHEW WEST, AWARD-WINNING SINGER-SONGWRITER,
AUTHOR, AND COFOUNDER OF POPWE



ONE

Faith Like a Child

I SAT ON THE FRONT STEP WITH MY BACKPACK LOADED for adventure, tapping my tennis shoe on the concrete. My older brother, Jacob, was supposed to pick me up at 3:00 that autumn afternoon, but he was late as usual. I had hurried through my eighth-grade homework so we could leave as early as possible. I was not surprised Jacob was late, but I was a bit annoyed.

I wanted every minute with him I could get. And whatever last-moment idea had caught his attention was stealing precious minutes from our time together. Finally, Jacob's gray Ford pickup turned the corner onto our street. I jumped up with a grin.

"Hey, Annie," he called through his rolled-down window. "Ready to go?"

"I was ready thirty minutes ago!" I pretended to still be annoyed, but I wasn't. Jacob's presence always lifted my mood. I hopped into the passenger seat and buckled up, eager to be on the road.

"Can I turn on the radio?" I asked, reaching for the knob.

MY JESUS

“Only if you turn on country music.” He gave me a playful wink as he backed out of the driveway. We were on our way. The hour-long drive to the Wilson Family Farm was always filled with country music and laughter when I was with Jacob. My brother made me laugh more than anyone else, and I felt carefree sitting by his side as we drove through the curvy backroads of Kentucky.

Wilson Family Farm belongs to Daddy’s side of the family and is my favorite place on earth. I love the variety of the land—the open fields, the heavily wooded hills, the cool valleys, and the picturesque trails winding through it all. Granddaddy lives out on the farm with his wife, Jan, and oversees every inch. We have chickens, pigs, donkeys, cows, and horses. The property is also home to several barns, a hayloft, and the farmhouse. With more than five hundred acres to explore, Wilson Farm offers both fun and solitude. I had been going out there for as long as I could remember. Though we lived in the suburbs, I had the heart of a country girl and often wished I could live on the farm.

When we arrived that day, Jacob and I headed straight to the barn where we saddled up two horses. We often hiked the trails on the farm, but that day we would explore them by horseback. Riding horses always felt more adventurous to me—like we could do anything we set our minds to. And that day we decided to ride up High Point Mountain, the name our family gave to one of my favorite spots on the farm. From the top you can look down over the entire property and out across the horizon for miles.

Jacob led the way as we rode up the winding trail. Every few seconds he looked back to check on me. I pretended his watchfulness irritated me, but it actually made me feel safe. I knew my

brother would protect me no matter what happened. Once we reached the summit, we tied our horses to a tree and sat down on a patch of soft grass to relax.

Those moments on the mountain were always the best part of the whole excursion for me. Jacob and I were the only two people around for miles. Staring out over the blue-tinted grass covering the open Kentucky fields below, we shared our dreams for the future. I felt grateful that Jacob let me into his world. Even with eight years between us, he made me feel like we were best friends.

“Well, Annie,” Jacob said after a few minutes of comfortable silence, “how are your plans for space travel coming along?”

“Very funny,” I said, rolling my eyes. “You’ll see. Someday I’ll be an astronaut and wave at you from space.” Jacob laughed, but in a way that told me he was proud of me for working toward my dream. I was following the advice he always gave to my sister, Elizabeth, and me: dream big, work hard, and be kind.

“All right,” he said. “Tell me about it again. What makes you want to go to space?”

“I don’t even know where to begin,” I said. Soon I found the words to explain how the wonders of the heavens God created intrigued me. I lay back on the grass and stared up at the light-blue sky. The breeze was swift, and the clouds moved quickly. “Don’t you just want to see what all God has made out there in the sky?”

Jacob didn’t reply. Instead, he lay back and joined me in staring up at the heavens. I listened to the wind moving the gold and orange leaves of the trees below us and thought how perfect this moment was. Then I turned to Jacob and asked him about

college—what classes he was taking and what books he was reading. His life, like the sky, fascinated me. In many ways, I hoped to be just like him one day. He told me he had just added a political science major to his current literature major.

“What is political science for?” I asked, wrinkling my nose.

“So I can become a lawyer, Annie,” he said, lacing his fingers behind his neck. “I want to find a way to help people through my profession—and that one feels right.”

“Well, I think you’ll be an amazing lawyer,” I said without hesitation. “You are so smart and so good with words. It’s perfect for you.”

I was proud of my big brother. Entwined with Jacob’s adventurous spirit was an old soul. God had given him extra doses of bravery and energy, but also wisdom and a love of learning. He enjoyed studying noble leaders, like Winston Churchill. Churchill, the British prime minister during World War II, stood up to evil and was a man of great wisdom and leadership. Jacob devoured the writings of C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, getting lost in their worlds of fantasy as well as their ideas on the Christian life. My brother was a deep thinker, an insatiable reader, and a beautiful writer—a creative soul who thrived in the great outdoors.

Shoot for the Stars

The following summer, my mother and I walked out of the large glass doors of the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex in Cape

Canaveral. We turned to look at each other. “You know this is what I’m going to do,” I said.

“I know,” she said, tears in her eyes. “And I have to be okay with it.” My mom knew me better than anyone else, so she recognized the passion in my heart. My parents, Kent and Lynn Wilson, encouraged all three of their children to pursue their dreams. Jacob, eight years my senior, was in college. My sister, Elizabeth, whom we call Liz, was eighteen and already following her dreams of clothing design, selling apparel through her thriving Etsy shop. But I was the youngest, and letting go was hard. Mom had raised me to believe anything was possible, and she knew my determination. Once I put my mind to something, I did it. I wanted to go to space.

Even as a toddler, I would stare up at the heavens in wonder. Everything in the sky fascinated me. But I was truly hooked in seventh grade when my science teacher, Mrs. Powell, taught us astronomy. From the hard plastic chairs of our school in Lexington, Kentucky, we explored God’s massive universe—the planets and stars an expression of God’s creativity. Mrs. Powell’s excitement over God’s intricate design was contagious, and I caught it. I became curious about many aspects of space and was intent on learning all I could about the heavens.

My parents not only encouraged my passion, they fanned it into flame. On that scorching summer day, my mom and dad went out of their way on our family vacation to allow me to see NASA firsthand. I was in my own world of delight exploring the history of space travel, listening to the tour guide describe exhilarating shuttle launches, and learning from a retired astronaut about the

MY JESUS

hard work and incredible joy of going to space. My nerve endings seemed to tingle as I imagined the rush of exiting our own atmosphere and viewing earth from the heavens.

My mom did not have the same thrilling experience I did, however. She was instead remembering the heartbreak of the space shuttle *Challenger* tragedy and reliving the day she watched the shuttle explode from her college student center. She had stood rooted to the ground, gasping in horror along with thousands of other Americans at the tragic sight. With these memories filling her mind, my mom realized that my ambitions involved great risk.

“I’m excited for you, Anne, even though I feel nervous about it,” Mom explained. Our eyes, squinting under the relentless Florida sun, locked together for a brief moment. “You are only on loan to me from God, sweetheart,” she said softly. “I’ve always known that. If His plans for you involve going to space, I’ll trust Him with that, and I’ll help you do it.”

Leaving the NASA headquarters was a bittersweet moment. I was more resolved than ever that this was what I wanted for my life. And my mom and dad resolved to trust God and let me go for it. Most parents tell their kids to aim for the stars; in my case, I was taking that advice literally.

When school resumed in the fall, I took double classes as a freshman so I could be prepared academically. I worked incredibly hard and gave up extra time with friends to make good grades so I could get into a college in line with my dreams. I had my eyes set on universities in Florida, nearer to Cape Canaveral than my own landlocked state of Kentucky.

Raised with Wonder

With Jacob and Liz as my childhood best friends, I developed a love of imagination and adventure early in my life. I went along with almost any idea they came up with, and I loved every minute of it. But it also became apparent that, unlike them, I relish order. I love to plan and prepare. If you need a logistics manager, to-do lists, or detailed plans, I'm your girl. In contrast to my siblings' free-spirited ways, I was the rule follower and the little boss who tried to keep my siblings on track.

I used to plan exactly what time we needed to leave the house to be on time wherever we were going. And if we had a free weekend or a vacation, I mapped out every minute for the whole family.

"But Annie," Jacob once teased me, "what if we don't want to do what you have planned for us on vacation?"

"Well, Jacob," I retorted, tilting my head with all the sass I could muster, "it's already written down, so you have to." Once my plans were down on paper, they were as good as done in my mind.

"Well, little Annie," Jacob replied, raising his eyebrows, "you need to understand that we might want to have our own plan . . . or no plan."

"Well, you're not the boss of *me!*" In this family of free spirits, I was doing my best to bring some structure.

We had only one TV in our home, which was tucked away in my parents' bedroom, so we had to create our own entertainment and adventure in our giant unfinished basement. My parents gave us free rein to transform the basement into any fantasy world we

MY JESUS

could imagine. It was a magical place for us, and we spent countless hours playing down there.

One year, my dad and Jacob transformed the basement into a basketball court, where Jacob could practice his dribbling and lay-ups while releasing some of his ample energy. He drilled the basketball goal into the wall, and my dad helped him spray lines on the concrete floor. When the court was finished, Jacob spent hours down there playing, the constant yet comforting sounds of a dribbling basketball echoing through our home. Sometimes Daddy would join him on his homemade court, and they'd shoot hoops late into the night, especially throughout the winter.

Another year my parents helped Liz and me turn the basement into a cupcake shop furnished with a table, chairs, and an Easy Bake Oven for making tiny culinary masterpieces. Using her artistic talents, Liz hand-painted a banner for our shop, complete with little hearts all over it, and our name: Cutie Pie Cupcakes. The tempting scents of chocolate and cinnamon invited many a friend and neighbor to sample our delicious treats. (Today Liz runs her own clothing business, and I can't help but wonder if running Cutie Pie Cupcakes is what ignited her entrepreneurial spirit.)

My favorite basement renovation was the time we turned it into the home of the March girls from the book *Little Women*. Along with our friends Emma and Sarah, we dressed up as the March sisters and, with our best manners, attempted to act just like them. In the darkness of the basement, we'd light candles and let the wax drip down onto the floor while we played in the soft light for hours on end. By the flickering light we wrote letters

and carefully sealed them with wax. The girls and I nibbled on little rolls from our local bakery as we sipped our tea. Then we retired to our bedrooms made from cardboard boxes and gazed out through the “windows” drawn with chalk on the cold concrete wall.

Being the youngest, I always wanted to be Amy. Liz was Jo, and Emma was Meg. My best friend, Sarah, was sometimes willing to be Beth, but other times she didn’t want to play that character, for reasons I won’t spoil if you haven’t read the book. At those times she chose instead to be a red-eyed fox, a character concocted from her own imagination, that snuck in through the window to liven up our story with a bit of suspense!

The Great Outdoors

I believe God gives siblings a special connection they share with no one else on earth, to be each other’s teachers, confidants, and friends. And this was very true of the Wilson siblings. We loved our times in the basement, but if Jacob had his way, all our adventures would have occurred outdoors. Our home has a spacious and well-kept backyard, ideal for games of make-believe. We especially loved playing in “the jumping tree” in our backyard. Climbing up that great willow tree required a team effort. Jacob would launch himself into the air and grab one of the many long limbs hanging from the tree.

“Here you go, girls!” he’d holler. “Jump on up!” As Jacob held down the branch, we would grab hold and pull ourselves up. Then

MY JESUS

the three of us would climb the tree together until we found our perfect spots. We spent hours in the branches of that tree, sharing secrets, stories, and jokes. Jacob could make me laugh until my sides hurt.

When the heavy spring rains caused the creek to swell, Jacob would lead Elizabeth and me down to the water to build miniature rafts out of cardboard, leaves, and branches. Once we were each satisfied with our boats, we would race them down the rushing current. That creek is also where Jacob taught us to catch crawdads.

He would kneel by the flowing water and do his best to bolster our confidence as we hunted the little freshwater crustaceans.

“Come on, Anne,” he coaxed. “Grab that one! Grab him firmly on his body so his little claws can’t reach you.” I reached out for the crawdad but quickly retracted my hand as the creature scurried away in his backward fashion. He looked so aggressive with his sharp claws and quick flashing movements.

Jacob chuckled. “You don’t have to be afraid of that little thing. He’s afraid of *you!*” I took him at his word, gathered my courage, and tried again. *Success!* I giggled with joy as I proudly held my prize up for Jacob to see.

One winter Jacob conceived the brilliant idea of making an ice-skating rink in our backyard. When the temperature dipped below freezing, he removed all the furniture from the back patio. He gathered a bucket of hot water and a mop and proceeded to mop a layer of water onto the concrete. After the first layer was frozen, he mopped on another layer, and another, until a thick layer of ice had formed.

When the rink was finally ready, the three of us donned our warmest coats and hats. We shoved our feet into our skates and tied them tightly around our ankles. Liz and I ventured out onto the ice slowly, but Jacob went all in, sliding across the slick patio and pulling us with him. He put his hands on our waists and pushed us around the ice.

“Stop it!” we yelled, laughing. But he knew as well as we did that his stopping was the last thing we actually wanted. In fact, we begged him to do it for us the following year, and from then on Jacob made us an ice rink every year until he graduated.

Pictures of Jesus

That one little TV in our home, though rarely watched, did play an important role in my life. As a little girl, I would crawl onto the foot of my parents’ bed and curl up to view *The Gospel of John*, a movie my family enjoyed watching together. I’ve seen the film enough times that I’ve nearly memorized it word for word. I felt the deep emotions portrayed in this telling of Jesus’ time on earth and watched transfixed as Jesus used common, everyday things like dirt and spit to heal a blind man. I loved to see the Savior interact with people in the middle of their ordinary lives. It made Jesus seem so real to me, and I wished I could be one of those kids who sat on His lap and talked to Him face-to-face.

My mom tells me that I have always seemed to have a compassionate, empathetic spirit—I feel what others feel. So when the movie neared the scene where Jesus died on the cross, I refused to

MY JESUS

watch. I knew the pain and anguish that was coming, and I could not handle even the thought of it. So I would fast-forward right through to His resurrection. I refused to watch my sweet Jesus go through that agony, because I felt it so deeply in my little-girl heart. Even at that tender age, I loved Him. And as I came to Him with my childlike faith, I am sure He delighted in my love.

From this film, I first recognized the truth that Jesus knew suffering. He endured pain that I cannot imagine and never wanted to glimpse as a little girl. Jesus walked His own road of suffering, and therefore, I know He empathizes with mine.

When we were young, my mom used to tuck us all into our beds every night and pray over us. “Oh, I love you so good!” she would say, holding us close. “You are my breath, my oxygen, my everything.” Then she would sit back, stroke our hair, and add, “As much as I love you, honey, God loves you so much more.”

My siblings and I never doubted our mother’s love. She loves extravagantly, holding little back. Experiencing my mom’s very tangible love in those moments helped me to understand, as much as a little girl can, the great love of the Father.

My earthly father—my daddy—also showed me glimpses of God’s love every day of my life. Daddy is the rock of our family. For me, he has always been a safety net—the person I could go to when I was in trouble or in need of assistance. If I got hurt, he comforted me. If I needed help on homework, he was the first one I went to. When I needed advice about anything, from drama with friends to how to understand the Bible, I knew I could talk to Daddy about it. He listened without judgment.

I’ll always remember the morning of my fourth birthday. On

that special day, my daddy, my hero, came to carry me downstairs in grand style. “Happy birthday, sweetheart,” he said, greeting me with a big hug and a kiss. Then he swung me up onto his strong shoulders. I was the birthday princess, seeing the world from that safe perch. Up there I could see what he saw, far above the smaller vantage point of my usual four-year-old height. To this day, I still run to Daddy for help to see a new perspective and feel the comfort of his love. In fact, I am convinced that without the foundation of love and faith both my parents laid for us, we could not have survived the storms that lay ahead—at least not with our hearts and belief intact.

Grounded in Truth

I grew up attending Bates Creek Presbyterian Church with my family from the time I was four years old. As I sat in the pews of this beautiful church, the knowledge of God and His Word began to solidify in my mind under the teachings of Reverend Mark Randle. I used to sit in my Sunday school classroom soaking in the stories about Jesus, excited to tell my mom all about them at Sunday dinner. As I listened to the sermons and sang the old sacred hymns, I learned who God is and what His Word says. Standing with my family, hymnal in hand, I would gaze up at the cross as all our voices blended together and proclaimed the truth in songs such as “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.”

At that time in my life, hymns were the only kind of worship music I knew, and the declarations of God’s faithfulness and

MY JESUS

majesty went deep into my soul. From there, the Holy Spirit can draw them up anytime He desires. Throughout my life, the Lord has often brought the words and melodies of these beloved hymns to my mind, even inspiring me as a songwriter.

By the time I was in junior high, I had a wealth of knowledge about Christianity, but all I'd learned was still mostly at a head level. I knew so much about the Lord, but I had yet to experience Him for myself at an intimate heart level. It was on the first day of seventh grade that I had an unexpected encounter with God. I was attending Veritas Christian Academy, the small Christian school my mom and our close friend Jenna, whom I called Aunt Nene, founded when I was in the fourth grade. Together, Jenna and my mom grew the university-model school every year, with my mom as the director. Students would attend class two to three days a week and spend the other days working at home with their parents. To this day, my mom continues to pour her heart and soul into the teachers and students of this precious school.

I slid into my seat right next to Sarah that September afternoon, excited for the start of the year. My day had been great so far. I'd caught up with my old friends and met new ones who had just entered our school. With fewer than one hundred students and around twenty teachers, newcomers were quite an event for us at Veritas. Following the university model, the school's classes were designed to be small, and they were especially so during the first few years of the school's existence. There were only twelve students in my class, and we all felt like family.

Bible class started at 1:00 in the afternoon that day, and we all sat excitedly waiting for our teacher's arrival. As he walked

into the classroom, all eyes were on the tall man with the engaging smile. The moment he entered, I immediately felt an internal shift. It was as though he brought joy and light into the classroom with him, but I didn't understand why I felt that way.

Pastor Cameron McDonald gathered us around for introductions. He seemed kind and full of energy. As he asked each of us to introduce ourselves, he listened intently, which made us feel like we truly mattered to him. "What's your name, and what do you love most about this school?" Whatever our answer was, he responded like it was the best thing he'd heard all day.

After hearing about each student, Pastor Cameron then introduced himself, telling us about his family of six and the church where he was pastor. He also shared about a recent tragedy in his life. His brother-in-law—his best friend—had just died as the result of a car accident, leaving behind a wife and three young children. With the empathetic heart God put inside me, I felt his pain. My heart broke for this teacher I had just met.

But then Pastor Cameron began to share with us how much Jesus meant to him. That arrested my attention. Suddenly, he began to cry. This vivacious, strong man had big tears in his eyes at the mention of the name of Jesus, and that hit my heart with a wave of emotion and confusion. I had never seen anyone react that way to Jesus. I remember thinking, *This is a grown man, married with kids, and he's literally crying over the name of Jesus.* It was new and surprising to me, and it stirred something deep within my soul.

What I saw in him was beyond anything I had learned about before, and I wanted to know more. As though he knew my

MY JESUS

thoughts, he taught that day about knowing God and having a personal relationship with Him. Near the end of class, Pastor Cameron offered to pray over each of us individually. Being prayed over was nothing new to me, since my mom did it every night, but this time something happened inside me that I'd never experienced before.

"May I pray over you, Anne?" Pastor Cameron asked.

"Yes, please do," I responded.

"You are God's precious daughter," he said, looking intently at me. Then he began to pray. I wish I could remember the words of his prayer that day, but all I can remember are those sweet words he shared with me about how God sees me. And I remember how those words made me feel. I will never forget the liquid love that coursed through my veins and the powerful energy pulsing through my being. I didn't know what it was then, but I now know that feeling was the Holy Spirit. I felt love like a power source, in a way I'd never felt it before. I already knew what it was to be deeply loved by my parents. But this was different. This was life changing. This was power. And I wanted more of it.

If this grown man is crying over Jesus, I thought, and I feel this kind of love, then everything I've learned about Jesus all my life must be real. Jesus must be real. It's true—all I've been taught, it's all true.

Pastor Cameron ended our first Bible class together with worship unlike any I'd ever heard before. Instead of the hymns I was used to, he played a video of spontaneous worship with Steffany Gretzinger called "Tip of My Toes." I had never experienced worship music like this before, and it immediately drew me in. As I

closed my eyes and began to worship God, another wave of the Holy Spirit hit my whole being. I may have looked calm on the outside, but on the inside, eternal transformation was beginning. I felt God pull me toward Him like a magnet. I knew He was real, and I wanted a personal relationship with Him. Everything I'd been taught as a kid suddenly connected inside me. All at once, my heart knew what my mind had always believed: *Not only is Jesus real, but He wants a relationship with me.*

Tears sprang to my eyes as I remembered the words I'd just heard about how God sees me: *precious daughter*. Undone by the depth of meaning in those two words, I whispered in my heart, *I am Your precious daughter. Thank You, Father.*

That night, alone in my room, I had the final sealing moment of this divine encounter. I went upstairs to be alone with God. Kneeling beside my bed, I bowed my head and let the tears come once again. "Jesus, thank You for dying for me and forgiving me of every bad thing I've ever done. I feel so free with You now, unashamed to stand in Your presence. I want You to be my Lord and my Savior both now and forever. I always want to feel this kind of love. I surrender to You completely." I went all in on Jesus because He had given all for me.

It's amazing how God weaves our moments together, such intricate little details that become the golden threads of our lives. He sees the end from the beginning, but we see only the moment. I relish the precious memories of my childhood—the imaginative play with my siblings, the love of my parents, the dream of going to space and exploring God's heavens—but at the time I only saw them as the regular moments of everyday life. I did not know that

my heavenly Father was writing a story so much larger than my hopes to go to space or the sweet little adventures of my youth. He wove into me the very foundation I would need for the grander story *He* had in mind—one I didn't even know to dream.

A Note from Anne

As I was growing up, my parents made sure I had a rich understanding of who God is and what His Word says. Yet the transition from the head knowledge *about* God to the heart relationship *with* Him was a personal choice. It is the same for you. You may know as much as my childhood preacher does about God, but it's not until you've chosen to believe in Him with your *heart* that everything changes.

For me, that happened when I realized that all I had learned about God was true and I encountered Him as a person who *wanted* to have a relationship with me. All those times of watching the movie of Jesus' years on earth and seeing His interactions with people in their everyday lives suddenly became *real* to me. And on that first day of seventh grade, I experienced Him as Immanuel—"God with [me]." He is the God who enters real life with us and makes His presence known in everyday situations, because He *wants* a personal relationship with us. That is why the Son of God came, died, and rose again. Whether you've never known Him, only had a head knowledge of Him, or already walk in personal relationship with Him, I invite you into a deeper and more intimate relationship with Jesus right now. There is always more.

FAITH LIKE A CHILD

This is the word of faith that we preach: that if you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

ROMANS 10:8-9 MEV